

Is Taiwan a Country?

From Matt Rosenberg (about.geography.com), Apr 10, 2005

There are eight accepted criteria used to determine whether a place is an independent country (also known as a State with a capital "s") or not.

Let us examine these eight criteria in regard to Taiwan, a tiny island (slightly smaller than Maryland and Delaware combined) located across the Taiwan Strait from mainland China (the People's Republic of China).

Taiwan developed into its modern situation following the Communist victory on the mainland in 1949 when two million Chinese Nationalists fled to Taiwan and established a government for all of China on the island. From that point and until 1971, Taiwan was recognized as "China" in the United Nations.

Mainland China's position on Taiwan is that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China.

The People's Republic of China is simply awaiting reunification. However, Taiwan claims independence as a distinct State. We will now determine which is the case.

1. Has space or territory that has internationally recognized boundaries (boundary disputes are OK).

Somewhat. The United States and most other significant nations recognize one China and thus include the boundaries of Taiwan as being part of the boundaries of China.

2. Has people who live there on an ongoing basis.

Absolutely! Taiwan is home to almost 23 million people, making it the 48th largest "country" in the world, with a population slightly smaller than North Korea but larger than Romania.

3. Has economic activity and an organized economy. A country regulates foreign and domestic trade and issues money.

Absolutely! Taiwan is an economic powerhouse - it's one of the four economic tigers of Southeast Asia. Its GDP per capita is among the top 30 of the world. Taiwan has its own currency, the new Taiwan dollar.

4. Has the power of social engineering, such as education.

Absolutely! Education is compulsory and Taiwan has more than 150 institutions of higher learning. Taiwan is home to the Palace Museum, which houses over 650,000 pieces of Chinese bronze, jade, calligraphy, painting, and porcelain.

5. Has a transportation system for moving goods and people.

Absolutely! Taiwan has an extensive internal and external transportation network that consists of roads, highways, pipelines, railroads, airports, and sea ports. Taiwan can ship goods, there's no question about that!

6. Has a government that provides public services and police power.

Absolutely! Taiwan has multiple branches of military - Army, Navy (including Marine Corps), Air Force, Coast Guard Administration, Armed Forces Reserve Command, Combined Service Forces Command, and Armed Forces Police Command. There are almost 400,000 active duty members of the military and the country spends about 15-16% of its budget on defense.

Taiwan's main threat is from mainland China, which has approved an anti-secession law that allows a military attack on Taiwan to prevent the island from seeking independence.

Additionally, the United States sells Taiwan military equipment and is obligated to defend Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act.

7. Has sovereignty. No other State should have power over the country's territory.

Somewhat. While Taiwan has maintained its own control over the island from Taipei since 1949, China still claims to have control over Taiwan.

8. Has external recognition. A country has been "voted into the club" by other countries.

No! Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations and only 26 countries (as of early 2005) recognize Taiwan as an independent country. Taiwan does not maintain an embassy in the United States and the United States has not recognized Taiwan since January 1, 1979.

However, many countries have set up unofficial organizations to carry out commercial and other relations with Taiwan.

Taiwan is represented in 122 countries unofficially. Taiwan maintains contact with the United States through two through an unofficial instrumentalities - American Institute in Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office.

Recently, Taiwan has lobbied strongly for admission into international organizations such as the United Nations, which mainland China opposes.

Therefore, Taiwan only meets five of the eight criteria fully. Another two criteria are met somewhat but in one criteria, typically the most important of them all, Taiwan falls short of maintaining international recognition as an independent country.

In conclusion, we can only consider Taiwan to be a quasi-independent state and if one must give a yes or no answer to the question of, "Is Taiwan an independent country?" the answer must be no.